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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE VISIT OF THAI CHIEF OF DEFENSE
GENERAL SONGKITTI

Classified By: Charge d' Affaires a.i. Robert D. Griffiths, Reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary. The visit of Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF) Chief of Defense Forces General Songkitti Jaggabartra to the PACOM-sponsored Chiefs of Defense conference and to Washington to meet with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen affords a chance to affirm support for our important mil-mil relationship and initiatives such as Cobra Gold, the Defense Reform Management Study (DRMS), and Thailand's deployment of peacekeepers to Darfur. END SUMMARY.

ENDURING BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

¶12. (C) Our military relationship began during World War II when the U.S. trained hundreds of Thais as part of the "Free Thai Movement" that covertly conducted special operations against the Japanese forces occupying Thailand and drew closer during the Korean War era when Thailand provided troops for the UN effort. Thai soldiers, sailors, and airmen also fought side-by-side with U.S. counterparts in the Vietnam War and, more recently, Thailand sent contingents to Afghanistan and Iraq.

¶13. (C) The relationship has evolved into a partnership that provides the U.S. with unique benefits. As one of five U.S. treaty allies in Asia and straddling a major force projection air/sea corridor, Thailand remains crucial to U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. Underpinning our strong bilateral relations is the U.S.-Thai security relationship, which is based on over fifty years of close cooperation. The relationship has advanced USG interests while developing Thai military, intelligence, and law enforcement capabilities.

¶14. (C) Thailand's strategic importance to the U.S. should not be understated. Our military engagement affords us unique training venues in Asia, training exercises that are nearly impossible to match elsewhere, a willing participant in international peacekeeping operations, essential access to facilities amid vital sea and air lanes that support contingency and humanitarian missions, and a partner that is a key South East Asian nation, and current chair of ASEAN.

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

¶15. (C) The December 2008 installation of the Democrat-led coalition government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva calmed the Thai political environment as the "yellow-shirt" People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) halted street protests. That said, the "red-shirt" United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) has continued protests against the government with a royal pardon for their champion, former

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, among the objectives.

¶ 16. (C) The basic split in Thai society and the body politic remains. The traditional royalist elite, urban middle class, Bangkok, and the south on one side ("yellow" in shorthand) and the political allies of ex-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, currently a fugitive abroad, along with largely rural supporters in the North and Northeast ("red") on the other. Neither side of this split is as democratic as it claims to be, and both movements reflect concerns stemming from perceptions of a lack of social and economic justice in Thailand. New elections would not likely calm political tensions, and political discord could very well persist for years. We continue to stress to Thai interlocutors the need for all parties to avoid violence and respect democratic norms within the framework of the constitution and rule of law.

¶ 17. (C) Prime Minister Abhisit has had to navigate a difficult political climate and tough economic circumstances. Abhisit generally has progressive instincts and says the right things about basic freedoms, social inequities, policy towards Burma, and how to address the troubled deep south, afflicted by a grinding ethno-nationalist Muslim-Malay separatist insurgency. Whether Abhisit can deliver change is another matter. He is beset with a fractious coalition, with partners more interested in self-enrichment than good governance.

IMPORTANT MILITARY ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM

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¶ 18. (C) Thailand's willingness to allow the United States to use U-tapao Naval Air Station as the hub for our regional assistance program was key to making the 2004 tsunami and the 2008 Cyclone Nargis relief operations a success. While those high-profile relief operations highlighted publicly the value of access to U-tapao, the air base has been a mainstay for our military flights. A prime example was the critical support U-tapao provided during OEF by providing an air bridge in support of refueling missions en route to Afghanistan. Approximately 1,000 flights transit U-tapao every year in support of critical U.S. military operations both regionally and to strategic areas of the world. Thailand also provides valued port access with U.S. naval vessels making calls, primarily at Laem Chabang and Sattahip, over sixty times per year for exercises and visits.

COBRA GOLD AND THE MILITARY EXERCISE PROGRAM

¶ 19. (C) By means of access to good military base infrastructure and large areas to conduct unrestricted operations, Thailand gives the U.S. military a platform for exercises unique in Asia. Thai leaders are far more willing to host multinational exercises than are other countries in Asia. Unlike Japan, which only hosts annual bilateral exercises due to legal prohibitions over collective security, or the Philippines, where planning for multinational exercises has been difficult, or Australia, which refuses to multilateralize Tandem Thrust, the Thai government encourages multinational exercises as a way to show regional leadership. This has allowed us to use exercises in Thailand to further key U.S. objectives, such as supporting Japan's growing military role in Asia and engaging the Indonesian and Singaporean militaries.

¶ 10. (C) Cobra Gold, the capstone event of our exercise program, is PACOM's largest annual multi-lateral exercise and for 28 years has served to strengthen our relations with Thailand, highlight our commitment to Southeast Asia, and provide exceptional training opportunities for our troops. The event has evolved over the years and now facilitates important objectives such as promoting a greater role in the

Asian Pacific region for Japan, Singapore, and South Korea and re-establishing a partner role with Indonesia. Cobra Gold is key to building partner nation capacity in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, especially at a time when U.S. forces face other global commitments. We have also been able to incorporate into Cobra Gold a robust Global Peacekeeping Operations Initiative (GPOI) event with the active participation of Indonesia and Singapore.

BORDER CONFLICT WITH CAMBODIA

¶11. (C) Bilateral relations with Cambodia continue to be volatile, primarily due to a border dispute centered on 4.6 square kilometers of overlapping territorial claims adjacent to the 11th century Hindu Preah Vihear temple. Minor skirmishes have erupted three times since mid-2008, leading to the deaths of seven soldiers.

¶12. (C) The roots of the dispute lie in the Siam-France agreements of 1904-8 and a 1962 International Court of Justice ruling that granted Cambodia the temple but left the rest of disputed land unresolved. Tensions spiked in 2008 when the Thai government in power at that time supported Cambodia's application to UNESCO for a joint listing of the temple as a world heritage site, only to subsequently face opposition in parliament and an adverse court ruling.

¶13. (C) Difficult issues lay at the heart of the matter and political schism in Bangkok may make tough decisions more difficult for the Thai government. We urge both sides to resolve their differences peacefully through bilateral negotiations, border demarcation, and a reduction of troops deployed along the border. Talks under the auspices of the Foreign Ministry-led Joint Border Commission (JBC) are attempting to address the conflict through negotiations, but thorny internal politics and historical rancor between Thailand and Cambodia make progress difficult.

PEACEKEEPING EFFORTS

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¶14. (C) Thailand has historically been a strong supporter of UN peacekeeping missions and was an early contributing nation to operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, Thai generals very effectively led UN forces in East Timor, where Thailand contributed 1,500 troops, and in Aceh, where a Thai general served as the principal deputy of the Aceh Monitoring Mission. Thailand's success in peacekeeping has led the RTG and the military to seek a more prominent role in international stabilization and peacekeeping missions. For instance, Thailand is currently preparing for a deployment of a battalion of troops for a difficult UNAMID mission in Darfur. With deployment currently scheduled for early 2010, we have continued to underscore to the leadership of the Thai military that we stand ready to assist again where possible.

¶15. (C) We are working with the military to increase its peacekeeping capabilities, both as a contributing nation and as a trainer of neighboring nations. Using GPOI funding, necessary upgrades and modernization work to a peacekeeping training facility at Pranburi will be completed in FY10. Thailand will provide instructors and maintain the facility, which will be used for Thai peacekeepers for deployments abroad and for peacekeeping training events with regional partners. Thailand is also working to become a center for training peacekeeping troops from around the region.

ONGOING REFUGEE CONCERN

¶16. (C) Due to inherent institutional capabilities, the Thai military plays a prominent role in the management of the many refugees that enter Thailand from neighboring countries. The

Thai government has so far failed to set up a transparent screening process for about 4,000 Lao Hmong -- some of whom we believe have a legitimate claim to refugee status -- who seek resettlement in the U.S. Detained in an RTARF-run camp for over two years, some are former fighters (or their descendants) allied with the U.S. against the communist Pathet Lao during the IndoChina War. We want to take every opportunity to underscore to the military the importance of transparently handling these refugee cases.

SOUTHERN THAILAND

¶17. (C) The Thai military, since the installation of General Anupong Paochinda as Army Commander, has taken a more assertive role in trying to quell the ethnic Malay Muslim-led insurgency in southern Thailand, a region that has witnessed episodic violence since its incorporation into Thailand in 1902. Regional violence has claimed more than 3,500 lives since January 2004, when the latest round of violence began to escalate. The root causes of the conflict are political and reflect larger issues of justice, decentralized democracy, and identity in Thai society. More specifically, however, Malay Muslims feel that they are second-class citizens in Thailand.

¶18. (C) The Thai military currently has the lead in trying to resolve the conflict, but has focused solely on the difficult security situation. General Anupong has made clear his feeling that political leaders need to take charge of efforts to solve the root causes of the insurgency. There is little political will in Bangkok to take on this issue, however, and the efforts of civilian agencies have lagged, focusing on economic development projects - which most analysts agree will have little impact on the violence. While the Abhisit government appears to want to adopt an integrated government approach to solving the insurgency with budgetary and policy decisions possibly transferred to the Office of the Prime Minister, it remains unclear how the civil-military dynamic will change.

¶19. (C) Southern separatists direct their anger at the government in Bangkok, not at the United States. Since a U.S. presence or perception of U.S. involvement in the South could redirect that anger towards us and link it to the international jihadist movement -- a link that is currently absent -- we ensure that any offers of assistance or training pass the "location and label" test. Put simply, we keep U.S. military personnel away from the far South and we make sure that we do not label any assistance or training as directly linked to the southern situation. Likewise, we work to avoid feeding rampant, outlandish speculation that we are somehow fomenting the violence in the South in order to justify

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building permanent bases -- a very sensitive issue in Thailand. We do not want to jeopardize our access to key military facilities in Thailand like Utapao Naval Air Station.

¶20. (C) The Embassy maintains a three-pronged focus to improve our military cooperation in order to address the violence in the South:
1) Using our exercise and training program to improve the professional and operational skills of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, especially the Thai Army;
2) Helping the Thai break down stovepipes between the Thai military, police forces, and civilian agencies;
3) Doing everything we can to ensure the Thai respect international human rights norms as they counter the violence.

INTEROPERABILITY

¶21. (SBU) The U.S. remains the country of first choice for arms procurement by the military, and has more than \$2 billion of arms procurements currently in process. We

continue to look at ways to improve interoperability with the Thai military, but must take into account the presence of other regional and global players. Following U.S. sanctions imposed as a consequence of the coup in 2006, other countries such as China, Israel, Sweden, and South Africa were looked at more closely for procurement.

¶22. (SBU) The Defense Resource Management Study (DRMS) program is finishing its second phase in Thailand. Former RTARF Supreme Commander General Boonsrang Niumpradit was a key proponent of defense reform and meetings with General Songkitti will provide an excellent opportunity to underscore our desire to work closely with the Thai military leadership as they work to learn from the DRMS process.

THE INCREASING ROLE OF CHINA

¶23. (C) Thai leaders continue to develop closer relations with China while simultaneously emphasizing the vital role of the U.S. in the region. While Thai military links with the United States are deeper and far more apparent than Sino-Thai links, China's growing influence in Thailand and Southeast Asia is evident in business, popular culture, the media, and the military.

¶24. (C) The Chinese, through hosting visits, have made a strong effort to court the Thai military. The Thai military has a range of Chinese weapons systems in its arsenal; the PLA Navy is interested in closer links with the Thai navy, and China has worked with Thailand to improve air defense equipment provided to Thailand in the late 1980's. In 2007 and 2008, Thai and Chinese Special Forces conducted joint exercises, and other mil-to-mil exchanges have expanded in recent years, as has the number of bilateral military VIP visits. A yet to be finalized bilateral Marine Corps exercise between China and Thailand near the eastern seaboard port of Sattahip next year highlights the continuing push by China to expand its mil-to-mil relations with Thailand's military.

¶25. (C) As the shape of Southeast Asia, Asia writ large, and the world has changed, so have Thai attitudes. The Chinese have been making a major push to upgrade all aspects of relations, including mil-mil with its ASEAN neighbors. Thailand is not interested in making a choice between the U.S. and China (nor do we see closer Chinese-Thai relations as automatically threatening to our interests here), but we will need to work harder to maintain the preferred status we have long enjoyed.

GRIFFITHS